

**Dear Trude:**

## **A Surgeon's Journal From Vietnam, Vol. II**

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My father was a United States Air Force surgeon who did a tour of duty '68-69 at Cam Ranh Bay base hospital in Vietnam. This publication is a selection of his letters home (he wrote every day to relax) to us, mostly the ones to my mother. In this set, he gives vivid descriptions of an attack on the base, specific medical procedures, local people, and meetings with celebrities who toured in support of the troops. This being the fiftieth anniversary year of these writings, I dedicate this publication to my late father and all other medical men and women who served in Vietnam.

**December 1, 1968**

Dear Trude

Your letter received today indicates that you've not been getting mail from me. I do write, essentially daily. Your feelings about promotion for me are more focused than I am. I thank you. I've always loved you, you know.

This is a lazy Sunday afternoon. I am on call -- last day of the week. Since there are 5 fully qualified general surgeons here and only 2 less-trained, we seniors take a week at a time as second call senior surgeons and ease the burden of the other 2 and take either first call or clinic in between our full weeks. It adds up to being on some sort of call almost daily.

With my seniority and position I would not have to do this but I would not accept any other arrangement.

The staff is magnificent. We form pretty nearly a university level medical center on these sands. Most outstanding of all in this memorable year is Col. Keil. This man simply defies description. I think he, more than anyone I've known, approaches true genius. He is enigmatic, a good administrator and a physician such as I have never known. I have no doubt that this man could be, and should be, our surgeon general. But the reason he is only a colonel is one of the reasons I admire him so. This is his tenacious individuality. I am sure he is thought of by superiors as just a perverted obstructionist. but I am even more certain that part of the reason he is not wearing stars is that everyone is somewhat cowed by him. He just dispassionately does not care when red tape, bureaucracy, and stupid aspects of established protocol set their lances to confront him. This guy can go on any ward -- he and I make rounds daily on some ward -- medical or surgical. His astute diagnoses are almost mystic in quality as is his knowledge of appropriate therapy. And I am humbly proud (if this is a possible apposition) that he holds me in a similar (but, doubtless, less) esteem. He is a giant of a clinician. He has not published for years but bibliographies reflect his vast contributions.

He is entirely modest but I have seen correspondence on many occasions -from -world- renowned authorities. He is impersonable largely. I don't think anybody could ever get really close to him. He missed most of humor that is not of his own generation but generates his own brand often enough and it is spontaneous and brilliant. He is sort of an enigma. Apparently besides the George Washington University Medical School as Professor and chairman of the dept of medicine, he has several plums he can choose from.

I am honored to work for this guy. and he certainly is the most interesting boss with whom I've associated.

Just thought you might be interested in what my boss is like.

Oh, by the way, as an after thought, we often don't agree on things that are and are not medical and we do have, at least moderately, charged arguments -- mostly medical.

These things must just bore the hell out of you. I write to you as I think. Magnanimous, huh?

Al

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[Undated December letter to my brother and I, but with enclosure of a Berry's World comic making fun of hippies from 1968.]

Hi guys--

Got your letter a couple of days ago, [my brother] John. It was so long! It was way past midnite by the time I got thru' it. By the way, did you get Mom a flashlight for her birthday, Matt and John? I would think it must be too cold to swim, now. Is that so? Did you get the last slides I sent? Almost all of them are of Hong Kong.

I bought a good slide projector in Hong Kong. Carousel-type. When I get back next summer, we'll look at all the pictures together. Some are pretty interesting.

I'm going to go to Australia in January for about a week. I'll try to get you guys some genuine Aborigine boomerang. With all the animals you've got, how about my sending home a kangaroo or koala bear, too?

Dad

So glad Pat [our sister] will be home for Xmas.

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**January 24, 1969**

Dear Trude

Perhaps I insisted upon getting out of hospital imprudently prematurely. Occasionally feel below par and draggy, yet. Especially today. Probable cause -- Ralph Reynolds, my doc, told me yesterday that studies -now- show that -while- I was most ill my paratyphoid titre (?) was very high. Probably auto-sympathetic, like "My God! Was I =that= sick?" Actually, the only real residua are feeling non-specifically punk on some days and complete enduring loss of taste for food.

From action reports there is good evidence that Charlie is setting up a big offensive again. Tet is on 17 Feb. or thereabouts. It looks probable that the bombing halt has permitted massive resupply to the V.C. and NVA. I wonder whether this aspect has reached many of the people back home. I suspect a temporary half-ass relative peace is worth any price to so many who completely ignore the practical objective facts that we have an enemy of greater potential and power today than before the halt and who is just as intent as ever to dominate SVN. I am afraid that we are far from the end of this war.

Al.

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**Jan. 26, 1969**

Dear Trude

There is such a communication gap between us ( in terms of time) . I got your letters of 21 and 22 today with your inquiries of my health condition. [Dad had gotten typhoid fever or similar infection, Dec. '68] I've been reasonably well for some time now. Still some residual soreness of the throat. The condition was so severe that the lining of my throat and tongue completely sloughed and the remaining soreness results from the raw uplacing tissues. No problem tho'. Just loss of appreciation of taste and

burning with certain foods and drinks.

I met Arthur Ashe and the others members of the Davis Cup winners, and Jimmy Stewart and his wife Gloria yesterday. All of who ('whom?' - Dad's question) toured the hospital visiting patients. Mrs Stewart is striking, vivacious. Jimmy is -quite- impressive. I had no idea (from his movies) that he is so damned big. Showing his age, also. I think he must be around 60.

The people who visit are escorted by the junior officers. The one of the latter who accompanied the Stewarts told me that while on the casualty ward where we had 4 recent amputation types, Jimmy broke down and there began tears in his eyes. The Stewarts spent several hours visiting the patients. All admirable people!

When Gypsy [Rose Lee] visited the guys, she (at every 5 beds or so) would ask the GI " can I crawl in bed with you?", the kids' eyes would invariably bulge and mouth hang open and Miss Lee would then crawl up to sit cross-legged on the bed and chat with the guy. The patients were nuts over her.

Tell John and Matt that Troy Donahue will be visiting in a couple of weeks. I don't know who he is exactly, but I think he is a sort of star to teenagers.

Our outfit ( the wing \_\_\_ 12th TFW \_\_\_ F4C's \_ fighters) has been losing planes recently -- 2 in the last 2 days. Crew members recovered by choppers. We're concentrating on the A Sha (sp? - Dad) Valley where the enemy infiltrates its men and supplies. This valley is one of the places that they have used, taking advantage of the bombing halt. Our guys are out today trying specifically to knock out some of the pinpointed gun emplacements. Hope they get the bastards.

Al.

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**Feb. 11, 1969**

Dear Trude

Received your letter of 7 Feb. Sounds like fun transporting and spreading Cayce's offerings from one spot to another. Does the fog that you describe also stifle to some degree the emanate odor? It seems to me that there is a distinct unattainment of optimum management there. I would think that if one spent 2 or 3 full twenty four hour periods of surveillance (in continuity) that one could establish a pattern of regularity and predictability Cayce's deposition of excreta, and if this did not involve exercise of this prerogative of his during the inconvenient nocturnal period one could lead Cayce to the desired recipient ground to transport his own generative gift to the soil. I think you would find this easier than leading him to water. Additionally if his pattern of motion is temporally distributed in a desultory and cavalier pattern, the introduction of a laxative (such as the mild but effective Dr. Gypsum's Soy Bean Regulator) might very well invoke the desired pattern.

They are thoughts that I offer to you freely and with accomplished generosity. I would think that anything should be tried before I would become a hauler of offal. I would just be awful to be an offal hauler.

No news on assignment yet.

Why are Bert and Sara Mary [family friends from the now-defunct AFB at Myrtle Beach, SC, where

we were also stationed, 1966-68] in the Tampa Bay area? Are they being assigned there?

Al.

[P.S.]

If you should have and other overwhelming problems just let me know. I like to help, especially when it involves primarily advice.

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**Feb. 12, 1969**

Dear Trude

Joe Burdick left yesterday for R & R to Hong Kong. By the way, when he leaves here he is going back to school -- U of Nebraska, Omaha -- to finish his degree -- two semesters -- on operation bootstrap. Sort of admire these older guys getting a degree piecemeal.

Tell the boys that I met the movie star Sebastian Cabot yesterday. He was in the TV serial *Checkmate* and later *Family Affair* - fat, British gentleman with large beard and moustache. He comes out here at least once a year. Apparently insisted on visiting during Tet last year because he felt he could bring some comfort to the many casualties of that time. Base photographer took a picture of Mr. Cabot and me. If it comes out, I'll get one and send it to the boys.



Dad (Col Albert Pierard) with Sebastian Cabot ("Family Affair"), Vietnam, 1969

Received your letter 8 Feb today. I would like to thank you, Trudy, for your diligence in writing essentially every day.

You report that you've not received a letter from me in 4 days. Must be tied up somewhere for rarely a day passes without my writing something.

Al.

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**Feb. 15, 1969**

Dear Trude

Tet starts tomorrow. The next day or two should indicate the direction the enemy chooses. Private feeling is that while their potential has been pretty severely attenuated, they probably -- almost certainly -- will strike every base, post, key city with all the capability they possess. Reasoning is that to the world at large, and especially uncommitted and developing countries, they (the enemy) -do- have a war potential and will not reverse their commitment intent. This, in turn, might better their chances at the talks in Paris, at least as far as world pressure is concerned. At any rate, this is the impression over here of us inexperienced International Political Analysts.

Sure is quiet around without Joe gone. One can't dislike the guy but he talks so goddamn much. A steady stream. I enjoy this quiet and serenity.  
No letter for a couple of days.

Al.

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**Feb. 16, 1969**

Dear Trude

Sunday. Got your letter of the 12th today -- the one with the Gaspar legend. Again, why were the Branhams there? Transfer? Siting the Bay area for retirement? The boys were pretty perceptive to choose Bert and Saramary as devoted friends. Great people.

Joe's back. Reminds me of that ludicrous TV commercial of some hair oil-- "I've come back to..?" Got up this morning at around 9:30 after a hell of a good party I had in my trailer for thoracic surgeon Frank Thomas who left for the States at 0200 and Bob Morris, newly arrived chest surgeon. Had as guests all the surgeons and Col. K and Col Burke. Great time. Col. K at his best.

Joe was not yet back when [illegible] and I decided what the hell, I've been taking myself and the world's affairs too seriously. Do -something- different this Sunday besides reading. So, after rounds, I got into my jeep to go to the beach. I'd only gone twice before. There are no little rocks, incidentally [my mother collected them] -- I'm sorry. Thought I'd treat my back acne [it was really bad] with healing ultra-violet.

I picked up four GI's on the way and went to the enlisted man's pavilion (of sorts) and enjoyed a cheeseburger, several beers, and their company. I was accepted as one of them even tho' I'm sure they knew I was at least (driving a jeep). They didn't let on and neither did I. And then I left for a deserted area of beach. The beaches here are, without doubt, some of the most beautiful on this earth. The beauty of the South China Sea and the rock and sandy configurations cannot be adequately described or probably, properly photographed. I plan, before leaving, to try to capture some bit of the magnificence. I walked the beach for a half-hour or so and found an old sea-washed timber upon which I sat to sun my back. I sat for just a few minutes when I saw a chopper over the dunes and thought it must be a "dust-off" bringing in casualties and while I am not on call today, I thought I'd come to the hospital where I am now. It was not a dust-off after all but just a chopper landing on our pad to let a passenger off. I am not especially miffed. I don't know what the hell I was doing on that timber, anyhow.

Trudy, I love you. I've not given the matter any particular thought actually. I miss you. I even miss

the in-fighting we get into. I have few positive feelings ( possibly too few) but it seems innate in me to love you. This is one of the few truths that I recognize. I think I should ask you to not comment on this. Let it "self-destruct" as on Mission Impossible. No double entendre intended.

I respond to whims now and then and I'll be damned if I tear this up.

I am heartened from a letter from Pat. One of her boyfriends sent her a number of classical records. Her letter was matter-of-fact enough but she asked me what my favorite music was. She wants to learn to appreciate good music.

Well, back again to rounds and hopelessly, reading, after all.

Al.

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**Feb. 17, 1969**

Dear Trude

First morning of official Tet. Quiet so far, as far as I know. Spots on this paper are not due to wine, coffee, blood, or tears. We've just run out of paper and I found this pad in one of the offices. Funny how I like these pads to write on. Almost as essential to me as heavy coffee mugs. While I am on this subject of cosmic importance, would you please send me 5 or 6 pads like this? Lord knows when we'll get some more.

Yes, Trudy, I would like very much for Matt to wear his watch. If I were there I think I could remove some links from the band. At any rate, a jeweler must know how or he will put on a cloth or leather strap. If Matt is not using the watch it is like my not sending him anything for Xmas. As a matter of fact, I like these watches so much that if I go to Japan or back to Hong Kong I plan to get us all another as back up or to replace ours when they deplete their usefulness. Yes, if I can find a suitable container, I'll send a Thai temple rubbing to you for Mike Branham.

Just came from surgery rounds. One of the surgeons, Ken Thomas, has a patient -- a Marine -- who suffered multiple wounds recently -- both eyes (but he will not lose his vision), arterial damage that has been repaired by grafting, chest wounds -- the works. But he'll very likely survive and with little residua. I am embarrassed by, and for, the kid. He whines and weeps and is generally very sorry for himself. He does have pain and discomfort and he is far from complete healing, but he does whine and complain.

I have dealt with more battle casualties than I like to think about and this man proves the exception to the rule ( I'd always disliked the 'logic' of this premise). The reason he has made such an impression on me is that I have seen nothing but courage, acceptance, and faith in the many others. And I had not thought a lot about it. But these guys have guts, resiliency and a real nobility of character. That is why, I think, that while we pity this one, he shames himself, his buddies, and us. Hard-nose thinking? Perhaps. But this is hard-nose warfare and stark, stark reality. My admiration for the bulk is great, indeed.

I read in today's Stars & Stripes that Florida was severely hit with weather Saturday. I hope we suffered no damage.

Al.

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**Feb. 18, 1969**

Dear Trude

2nd day of Tet and things are relatively quiet and we are wary. At last nite's intelligence briefing there were reports of the enemy violating the truce in widespread actions but they have been small with light casualties. No significant large scale attacks yet. We hope it remains this way. Some feeling is expressed that the enemy may -not- repeat last years' activities because of the poor acceptance by the whole country north and south since these days are holy days to Vietnamese throughout. Hard to say. There is the additional consideration that while the enemy claimed much publicity last year, they really lost heavily and have been ever since and they have much less going for them this year. While they might gain some propaganda value by virtue of just hitting several towns and installations, the losses may be overwhelming.

Trude, baby Hong is now so fat and big generally she has outgrown the disposable diapers we use here. Would you mind sending 2 or 3 dozen large-size diapers? In the meantime, I'll try to order some thru' supply.

Al.

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**February 18, 1969**

Hi guys

Matt, thank you for the Valentine card you made. It is so good to hear from you. You certainly draw well. You did draw the bunny didn't you and cut it out?

Guys, enclosed is a picture of Sebastian Cabot and me. I'm smiling because I am taller than he is and not so fat.

Dad

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**February 19, 1969**

Dear Trude

Received your letter of 18th today with the darkly hinting of "grim" and "ugly" gossip, appended with your "seeing no reason to pass it on" to me. Why the hell, then, do you mention it at all? Although my curiosity isn't particularly engaged it =is= like waiting for the other shoe to drop knowing that this won't take place until you are snug and just barely in the tantalizing first dreams of sleep. Honestly, I don't care very much but, why hint? I'm not angry I just barely speculate: who does it involve? Does it involve national or international intrigue? Does it have an impact on Our Placid Times? Has a well-stocked seraglio of Willie D's clever and clandestinely keep been unearthed? Did Saramary confess [something personal]? The possibilities are legion.

The only person who has been notified of assignment in our offices is Charlie Burke who is going to Vandenberg. John Sparks and Morgan Wing left 5-6 weeks ago and are respectively, Chairman Dep't



Psychiatry, Lackland, and Chief, hospital services, Tachikawa. Elliot Stuart left a month ago for Lackland. Tet continues to be quiet. As you might suspect, speculation is rife and often, pretty wild.

Oh, above, you asked also about Joe B. I think I wrote recently that he's going back to school -- U-Neb. -- gov't sponsored.

Can't think of anything new or exciting.

Al.

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**Feb. 21, 1969**

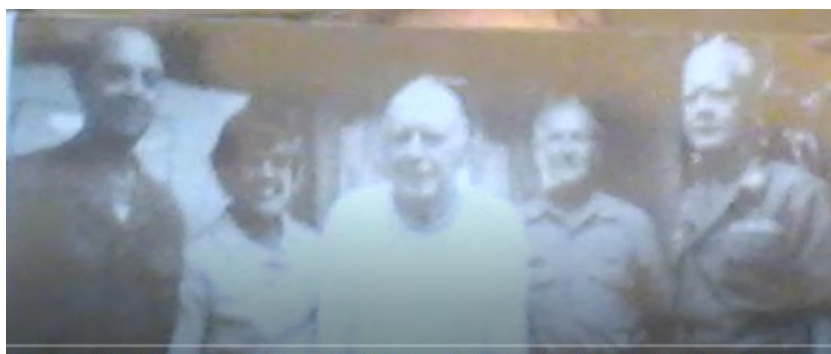
Dear Trude

Your letter of 17 Feb arrived today. How much damage did the storms cause? The area seems to attract violent weather. I appreciate your feeling of helplessness. I hope Mr. B. was able to help.

You refer to my restlessness. About my horror of the thought of "settling down". It is true that I feel this way. The Earth -- its peoples -- holds an inordinate fascination for me. As an example, I can hardly contain my anticipation in getting up to the mountain people, the Montaguards -- as I will, as soon as I'm allowed to travel (because of the tactical situation). This desire is based only partly on what I can do for these people, but, mostly to examine their culture, as it were. An excellent opportunity. I think I could, quite readily, become (for a limited period because again I'm sure I would become restless again) a member of the mission out there. And then, again, go from there to Hong Kong where indescribable poverty exists for so many, to work for a period. This is not missionary zeal that I feel. I am just damnably curious. My God, we have in now a Montaguard lady (who will not live because of the advanced stage of her disease) of about 35 y/o who is the quintessence of sub-aborigine. An animal-human. Now, how the hell am I to have that thrill in Brandon[?] I don't mean to imply psychotic fascination for the grotesquely ill, or primitive, either. These are solely experiences for me -- like el Esconial (sp?), seeing John Hunter's brass plaque in Westminster Abbey, etc. Life is to me a truly great adventure. Every bit of it. Is it possible to -live- too much? Am I a total nut? If I am, I don't want to be adjusted to normalcy.

I just read the above over. Excuse me. It's a sort of neurotic confession that I would never tell even my best priest (Jim Coubig [sp?]) about.

Enclosed is a picture of [actor] Pat O'Brien during his visit. Please tell the boys that I met, talked with and had lunch with Troy Donahue yesterday -- star of *Hawaiian Eye*, several other TV programs, and many movies.



Dad with Pat O'Brien, RC lady, Col. Keil, and Charlie Burke. CRB, Feb. 1969

Trude, in today's letter (as far as I can make out the word) you state that Cayce [Mom's horse] was pelting (? [Dad's ""]?) during the storm. What is that? I've never heard of a horse, or for that matter any thing doing anything like that. What is it?

Al.

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(top of page: "have to save all paper I can" [spare writing paper was scarce at CRB at the time, apparently])

**Feb. 22, 1969**

Dear Trude

Had the great pleasure of meeting a very great man this morning. He is Dr. Jim Turpin. Jim looks about 40 y/o. He began his productive life as a Baptist minister in Calif. He, after 2 or 3 years, went to medical school and upon completion set up practice for a few years and during this period evolved his grand (in a literal sense) scheme -- that of Project Concern. He retired from his profitable practice and with what he had saved and supplemented from other sources proceeded to set up hospitals in areas of greatest need. Besides Montaguards, others now operating include 2 in Hong Kong, 1 in Pakistan, 2 in Tijuana, and 2 others (I've forgotten where -- I'm pretty sure one is in West Virginia & Appalachia somewhere) These are all secular and staffed by a potpourri of physicians. French, Swiss, Chinese, German, American, etc. Jim is immensely impressive. He is handsome, fit, and young looking, very intelligent, sincere, modern and absolutely without any look of neurotic missionary zeal -- in some ways, the attitude of Rev Bryant.

He told us that the American Legion post in Wooster (Worcester?), Mass. had heard of the project and its leader (the A.L.) had coaxed and persuaded the citizens to make of a civic project a memorial to the cities' dead fighting men of this war and convinced the populace to contribute instead of into a statue, arch or what have you into a hospital in V.N. for the Montaguards and Vietnamese peasants. They contributed \$50,000 and Jim is getting the hospital begun (a second one) -- again not too far from here. Col. K and I are invited to attend the opening (or stone-laying?) ceremony on April 6th. Dignitaries to be Pres. Thieu, Gen. Abrams, and Ambassador Bunker. So his idea is truly blossoming. He hopes (and rather thinks) that the city in Mass. will have started a trend and he dreams of more and better, and better-staffed hospitals. And one thrilling thing about it is that Col. K may be able to give a significantly helping hand.

Jim mentioned that the American Legion National has indicated that Pres. Nixon has heard of the project and is very interested -- to the point that they intend (the A.L.) to ask him to attend their next meeting with the Project in mind. Now Col. K is a close friend of Col. Walt Thash (sp?), Nixon's personal physician and longtime personal friends (Walt was Eisenhower's physician during his tenure). Col. K is writing Walt today to ask for his intercession. We believe it will all be done. I was thinking, talking with Dr. Turpin, of the monumental gap between this Universal humanitarian and [redacted -- let's just say the liberal youth of the day]. They don't belong in the same world.

Al.

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**Feb. 23, 1969**

Dear Trude

Probably know CRB hit this A.M. To allay any fears-- I am OK. But extremely busy. If this keeps up I will especially try to write daily. Ironical thing -- I got a letter from you today indicating the "Tet offensive didn't materialize." But it did.

Al

Will be more specific later.

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**Feb. 24, 1969**

Dear Trude

At approximately 0300 yesterday sounds of *waump*, *Waump*, *WAUMP* nudged me from fairly deep sleep. You know how soundly I sleep. The night before last, however, before going to bed most of us felt that night would be the one. This from unusually high and reliable source. Strange the paradoxical calm I felt. One rocket, the last I heard, had hit either quite close or else I had reached a more complete wakefulness.

Joe and I encountered each other in the hall, verbally noted that CRB had just been hit, spent few seconds thinking about what to do. The siren was wailing Red Alert (take and keep cover) and we shrugged and decided to go back to sleep. I, actually, immediately did this and slept for another 1/2 hour and then reassessed the situation and decided well, hell, we're not supposed to be out but I'm going to the hospital. That jeep ride was the only time I felt a bit frightened strangely enough. I wasn't supposed to be out and I guess I could have been zapped by one of our own excited Security Police or, conversely, by the infiltrator. We had several casualties at the hospital when I arrived. Got that squared away and then I was called from elsewhere (won't say in letter) and asked if we could take X number of casualties from elsewhere.

Facilities throughout Republic were working at a fever-pace. I said yes, we would. So all day and thru' the nite we worked -- 6 O.R.'s all going all the time. We have things all pretty cleared out now.

The enemy certainly pounded everything the last 48 hours. We (CRB) got no more hits, last nite. I rather think the worst is over. Pretty sure of it.

A large fragment tore thru' Jim Shallow's quarters but missed him and he understandably spent the next 1/2 hour or so under the bed. That rocket we saw the next morning had landed not very many yards away.

Joe and I talked yesterday about our reaction to the rockets and we think we accepted it with the cool that we did because, somehow, in our unconscious minds the sound had the exact similarity to Flak sounds during our flying days, so rockets were sort of accustomed sounds, and, therefore, resignation was fairly natural. In the cool light of day, tho', if it happens again I will do the wise thing and if I sleep, sleep under the mattress I will.

Got a charming, very humorous letter from Pat yesterday.

Al.

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[Undated, but with enclosure: 2/20/69 *Beetle Bailey* comic strip of Sarge telling Zero to climb a tree for surveillance and him only seeing the bugs on it -- from The Observer, with "Had you guys seen this?"]

Hi guys--

Thanks for the letter, John. It is always good to hear from you and Matt.

I am glad that you are beginning to try at sports.

Do you realize that as you read this, it will be just about 2 months until I'm back with you? We've got a lot of getting acquainted again to do and I think, Matt and John, I'll have a lot of interesting things to tell you about my year over here.

One of the things I can hardly wait to do is to take you guys back to that Mexican restaurant [this was a place called The Mexican Burro, a Tampa legend near MacDill AFB, which sadly no longer exists]. Boy, do I miss Mexican food, and good old American hot dogs, hamburgers, and Col. Sanders' finger-lickin' good fried chicken. And stores and civilian cars and thousands of things.

We'll go to the beach again and walk together. I used to enjoy that, John and I will teach you to enjoy fishing, Matt. I think now that you are older, you'll have fun doing it. There are fine places to fish in Florida.

So long guys.

Dad

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**Feb. 27, 1969**

Dear Trude

We are so smug in our impressions. Amongst the Vietnamese civilians who work on the base (we have several hundred) is our papasan. Our papa-san stands out so because he -always, always- wears white pajamas to work in (and presumably sleep in) and a jungle-safari-type hat, is the hospital's only male civilian employee, the nature of his task, which consists of keeping the grounds clean (for this, he has acquired, somehow, tweezers with which he elegantly picks up cigarette stubs, etc.)

But, most of all, papa-san is viewed by all as being -the- epitome of the Oriental -- or at least the stereotyped one imbued in us by stories and films of childhood and since, I suspect. His face is the visage of evil incarnate of the Asian. He appears as impassive as the sand dunes and almost ludicrously inscrutable. The latter strikes one startlingly and we've all felt the same for liking the old man somehow because he is here, we see him daily, and respect the very immutability of his person. I've gone on on this because he is a definite presence.

Nobody ever greets him or tries to communicate with him and these facts have just consciously struck me. He hasn't missed a day of work since the Tet holidays and I've noted no change in him as he goes

about picking up trash in his harsh-appearing sort-of-dignified way. Incidentally, we learned about 3 weeks ago that he had built a shack between a couple of dunes and had been living there for some time right on the base. This is not permitted -- to stay on the base at night. We're certain that he had done this in complete innocence, getting material to build it with here and there. And three nights ago he went to his home in the hamlet in which he is supposed to live and found his only relatives, a brother and sister, dead with their throats slit -- a visitation of the V.C. As I said, he has not missed work and he goes on about his business with what -seems- to be splendid indifference. Alien people.

Got John and Matt's letters today. Very impressive kids. I think they have a lot of potential.

Al.

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**Feb. 28, 1969**

Dear Trude

The offensive continues, gradually dying down. Our losses have been significant and that of the enemy, tremendous. I think only their near-disdain for life permits them to continue. You may have read or heard on news broadcasts of the suicide raids they have been making. They straps pounds of explosives to their backs and charge, blowing themselves to infinity with the goal of taking our troops and allies with them. Infiltrators gained the base yesterday morning and fired at our perimeter guards producing no casualties and they got away from our S. P.'s.

Do you mind these reports? I think they might be tiresome. Got your letter of the 24th today. I'd almost forgotten the high cost of living in the States. There's little to spend any money on here so one tends to forget.

Please let me know as soon as the enclosed check arrives.

Al.

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**March 1, 1969**

Dear Trude

Pathetic thing. The VC have gained sporadic hit and run access to the villages and hamlets. With classic oriental methods of torture and mutilation they have killed a number of inhabitants and disfigured others. The victims are mainly known U.S. sympathizers, especially those working on U.S. installations. We employ 30 odd civilians in the hospital complex. I was discussing the situation with the Vietnamese interpreters today. They are terrified to return to their homes after work. The women say they, if attacked, would prefer to have their throats slashed -- a favorite method of killing of the terrorists, than be subjected to mutilation. These latter operations during the last week have included the ripping off of fingernails, amputation of noses, ears, fingers, whole hands. These actions have occurred during the last week during the unsteady state all over caused by the enemy offensive. The people I see look haggard and tired and apprehensive from their fear and lack of sleep. Poor, poor devils.

Received your letter of 25th today. Surprised a bit that you don't mention C.R.B. [Cam Ranh Bay]. I had been worried about excessive concern on your part because in some areas of the U.S. the pounding CRB took was exaggerated in the news (for instance, I saw a San Antonio newspaper clipping 2 or 3 days ago that stated that we were pounded for over 3 hrs.

Very reliable sources indicated that we were to be rocketed again last nite, but it did not come off. Our casualty figures for the week ending 26th were the highest in many months.

Since you've brought my attention to it, Charlie Burke -does- look like Marvin. [Lee?]

Al

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**Mar. 13, 1969**

Dear Trude

Not infrequently I get the urge to shuck convention and the trappings of 'civilization' and do voluntary medical work. There is such a great need. I become so stirred emotionally as today on rounds on Ward 5. Focal point was a baby brought in during the night. The baby was no worse off than those brought in daily. Today's, however, differed slightly in that its condition was largely due to parental neglect. This is rather uncommon since the Vietnamese do love, and attend to, their children. This baby is of undetermined, and as so many, indeterminate age. Looks about 12 months old. All that we know is that it's mother had died sometime ago and it's father was very ill -- to the extent that he was unable to care for the baby and he lives in a remote hamlet where none of the residents have ever seen a doctor.

The orphan home that we cover loses 2 to 3 infants each week due to malnutrition and lack of care, direct or medical. The orphanage is operated by Vietnamese Catholic nuns and although they care, they seem to be immune to any instruction we try to almost force upon them concerning hygiene, sanitation, or proper feeding. We do our utmost to salvage the infants and babies but I'm afraid we can not take care of the entire number.

The land is, and always has been, I suppose, in such misery. There are only 350 "physicians" in this country to attend 16 million people! That's one per almost 50,000 people.

Ah, well, we're doing what we can. No mail today. Stan Kantanie (sp? - me) dropped in to see me. He's at Tan Son Nhut. His wife, Mary, is pregnant.

As you know, we get one R & R and one leave. I intend to go to Hong Kong for the latter, probably in late May. Can you think of anything you want? If I get Pat a wig as you once recommended should it be full head or a fall? The big reason I bring all this up is to ask whether you still want the oriental rugs? I'm sure that they are extremely expensive even in this part of the world and if I do get them it will mean a considerable reduction in our savings account, the 10% thing. However, if you want them that much please send the sizes of the rooms and advise whether you wish full or part coverage.

**14 Mar** -- I didn't have a chance of getting this off last nite.

I was to go to DaMpao today but flying is catch-can over here. All hitchhiking really -- even for colonels. I will try again next week. I really felt terrible about it as they had gathered up 50

Montaguards for me to evaluate. But, the only way one can get in is by Army chopper and it is hard to arrange a personal visit like that.

Al.

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**April 19, 1969**

[attachment: official letter from USAF, dated 4/15/69, to Dad about his assignment (in August 1969) to MacDill AFB's 836 Tac Hospital in Tampa, signed by Donald R. Winkelblech, Colonel, USAF, MSC, Office of the Assistant Surgeon General, Washington, DC)

Dear Trude

Macabre early morning discussion. It is 0700. I've just arrived for work a few minutes ago. Put my radio (emergency type) in the office as I daily do. And as I routinely do, I went down to the emergency room to check the log of the night's events and, at least equally important, acquire my first cup of gov't coffee. Satisfied with both these needs, I saw Chief Master Sgt Fredrickson from the lab, with bags -- one duffel and one elongate of olive drab canvas, awaiting transportation.

"Where the hell are you going, Fred?"

"To Nha Trang, Sir."

"Boondoggle?"

"Partially, sir. I'm taking up a couple of limbs."

"Huh?" (Brilliant, since I've only been up a half-hour or so.)

"The incinerators on the base are limited to the incineration of classified material. So I -- or someone else -- has to go to Nha Trang to destroy the limbs. About once a month."

"Oh."

Facts of life

*'This is Sgt. Friday. It is still morning Out of L.A. Way out of L.A.*

*The mail just arrived (1041). Two letters. One official (enclosed). One personal. Letter -- wife -- wife and sexy-frustrated horse problem. Problems everywhere. (1041 .58[min]) I look up at vague approach of figure. Another envelope. From Brandon, Fla. Open. In envelope crayon-drawn picture. No signature. By Matt?, Trudy?, John? Everett [neighbor's goat, who was our horse's buddy] ? Repentant neighbor with mares?*

*The letter from you dated 14 April. We got MacDill. I'm happy if you are happy. Glad job is surgery. To be practical I want to keep as sharp as possible practicing =surgery full time=. I am a surgeon after all and I want to surge until the day I die. I don't want to retire from the A.F. to be a hospital administrator. So all came out well. Didn't it?" (1044 approximately)*

Al.

(P.S.)

Advise sell poor horse.

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**April 21, 1969**

Dear Trude

Your letter of the 17th. I agree, but passively. We, over here, don't think actively anymore. Morale is dropping, dropping, drop. The listlessness, lassitude, and thorough apathy approaches near shame and near disgust with our country's leaders. On a scale of possible morale and spirit of ten, the latter ( the enthusiasm) was between 8 and ten when I first arrived and it has dropped to 2. What the hell are we doing here?! We stop the bombing of the North. Morale plummets to 4. Pueblo fiasco, recent shot-down aircraft and morale is completely converted to despair. Hell, our guys are getting killed, killed, killed! And maimed. And for what?! I cry. I really do.

I sat next to an infantry captain on the plane on my return from H.K. We discussed the Great American Impotency and our humiliation. At one point the captain said wistfully and with great profundity: " I never know anymore when one of my kids is killed whether the attrition of B-52 raids might have been possible. You know, we could be killing our own people." -- by default. I didn't add, but was thinking of how many more are being killed daily by the cessation of bombing the North. We know that supplies and men are being brought down from N.V.N. at a rate of five times that before our great gesture.

So, we occasionally, but less and less, take stock and evoke incredible anger, confusion, and frustration. But mostly we bumble on day by day like robots and don't even give much thought to the activities that called us here.

Aircraft shot down? So, what's new? What's new is to get our speech writers to pen another apology. God damn.

Al.

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**April 23, 1969**

Dear Trude

I am certain as I am within my studied assessment of the Nature of Man that today's Hospital Planning, Progress and Facilities Utilization Committee was not unique (I've just left that august body.) Stentor, Solon, Pericles and certainly Philip II, Socrates, and H. P. Morgenthauer must have faced such seismic decisions and somehow carried on. So, I must. What we dealt with, at exhausting and enervating length, today, was were we or were we not going to have a Pots & Pans Room added to the hospital dining room. Another succulent and dream topic was that the Base Commander, in sweet and amicable concord with the Chief in Civil Engineers, had enunciated that, henceforth, all the hootches (a barely descriptive and onomatopoeic -- you should only hear the emitted sounds) term for the habitations of most of the people on base would be marked with a large red dot in identification for those which are not profitably re-habitable to make room for new ones. Well! This pronouncement was as exciting as the needs of Cleopatra's asp, although it evoked less non-somnolence.

Somehow, both these problems were solved with no contributions from me but I couldn't resist noting to Dr. Keil and those present that South Carolinians would be presented with a problem. Especially late at night.



Al.

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**May 3, 1969**

(Dad had originally written April, crossed it off, and made this note: "Have I been writing you up to now, I'll bet I have.", possibly an indication of battle fatigue)

Dear Trude

Your letter of 29 April today. (I wish I had a smooth writing pen. [letters of this period are written in fainter ink] Funny thing -- quirks. Mug for coffee and particular ones at that, squeezing last possible second of morning sleep, aversion to lights, conversations and other sensory stimuli in the early morning, delight with the smell of leather, writing paper. And pens. My thoughts flow less trammled without a pen to my liking. Certainly affects the script and, I strongly suspect, the quality of spelling. I like, best of all, old-fashioned broad-tipped fountain pens and, short of that, a broad-tipped easy-flowing ball point. I don't have either. I'm using that explanation, probably, as an excuse for the poor product of my letters.)

Give a man a pen he can write with and he'll probably bore you to tears and provoke all manner of psychosomatic ailments. Mostly emesis and facial tics.

Sounds to me as if you are working too hard. On the house, etc.

Can't think of anything to say. See -- it's this damned pen!

Al.

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**May 4, 1969**

Dear Trude

My thoughts so often stray now that I am within 2 months of home to green. Trees, grass, lakes. In Hong Kong, Pat and I were walking around the super block that includes the hotel where we stayed and on that street section opposite the side of the square where the hotel is, we happened by accident, upon a British area. It contained a serene, pleasing church of classically British design -- somewhat like some of the very pleasant smaller churches one sees in the picturesque villages of England. The church, maybe because of its setting, and the memories both evoked, looked older than it possibly could be. In the same compact area, which gave the illusion it was much larger and which reminded me of an extraordinarily pleasing common, was also a small university which undoubtedly was established in the past for the education of the Colony's children.

Somehow this tract seemed, and, I think was, fragmented from the rest of H.K. Much like an isle. It was quiet there. Few city sounds penetrated and once near the center, wherever one looked, he saw only this little bit of England. There were few people. It was on a Sunday as I remember and I think we saw only one adult male. There were three or four little children playing. They looked very British in their dress and hair but didn't seem as ruddy as those of England. They were playing around a tree, I remember. But, most of all, there were big, spreading and beautiful trees. So pleasant. And while lingering there, I was suddenly pleasantly startled to note the chirping, hurrying sounds of birds. It's ridiculous, I know, but that half-hour or so was a time of my greatest, and active, not passive, pleasure

since I left home, and somehow, since I was born.

Al.

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**May 6, 1969**

Dear Trude

Last nite I wrote a letter to you that I was hesitant to send. But I did send it. It was about the desperation I and others feel about what is happening to our country. I felt that I might sound, and be, somewhat paranoid, a nut. I am afraid that I was not being delusive, that my concern is greatly shared by others. This morning upon arriving at the hospital I got my cup of coffee in the Emergency Room as usual and was studying the overnite log of events and one of the corpsmen who works there, a college graduate, brought up the subject that I generally talked about in last nite's letter. We had not talked about this before. He, with a kind of sadness, told me that when he returns to the states he intends to pick up his family and migrate to Australia. This is a sincere, patriotic kid. He is giving up his home because of his disgust with it. He has sons 7 and 5 years old. He is concerned about their education, academic and moral, and this is one of the major reasons he is leaving America. He told me that another corpsman who works in the ER is doing the same thing. He goes to the States in 2 weeks. He has canceled his admission to a college in Charleston and is going with his family to Australia also.

A happy note that erases some of my despondency. On the log, the last person seen during the nite was seen because of a thrombosed hemorrhoid. His name, honest to God, is Leroy Broadbottom.

Al.

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**May 12, 1969**

Dear Trude

Joe got back from the Philippines yesterday. He brought back green onions, green peppers, carrots, and an avocado! If he had known how much I like avocados he would have brought more. Altogether he brought back over \$50 of groceries. We should be pretty well set up for the remainder of our tours.

Somewhere along the line my soup was converted to stew. I've been adding things daily. consequently, it has become bulkier and of thicker consistency. I don't know exactly when the metamorphosis took place but I officially declared it stew Saturday nite.

Terrorist activity has increased again. And, again, our civilian employees are frightened stiff. Just outside our gate last nite, V.C.s tossed a grenade into a passing jeep killing one ARVN officer outright. The other was critically injured. We operated on him last nite.

Despite this, our amputation count was zero this morning. first time in a long while. At morning report the (illegible) tramp gives the amputation count. It is a rough index of the casualty situation. We hit a recent high of 7 one day last week. These guys are part of the casualty load sent us daily from I and II corps mostly. they are sent to us primarily to be shipped out to Japan, Philippines, or CONUS. We have to take some out of the air evac system when we feel they are too critically wounded to travel.

I shouldn't write such disturbing matters, I suppose. It is just that these things comprise most of my work and thoughts.

Al.

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**May 14, 1969**

Dear Trude

I am in sympathy with much of [General] Omar's feelings but I think that he probably leans a little excessively to the right, as far as I am concerned. I would fear a [George] Wallace-oriented regime as much as that of the anarchy or communism that are infesting our country today.

The pendulum-idea of backlash in reactions to an untenable extreme worries me, also, with regard to the current trend and disruption. For a police-state is a police-state regardless of its generation. Again, some very perceptive man, writing of revolution states that "even revolution, by it's very natural outcome, creates it's own privileged (and often corrupt and tyrannical [Dad's thought; he also says he's paraphrasing the quote]) class." And going either extreme could do just that. That is why I pray for moderation. If this thing is ever nipped in the bud, I would be just as opposed to the threatened power of a Wallace as I would be to the chaos of a Ginsberg. So, we have that possibility to contend with. I keep thinking that what we need (and I don't know what this could be, short of a "popular" war) is something to pull our people together again. I faithfully believe this would happen. I believe that even the majority of dissenters are a lot of non-directed people, apart from the undoubted neurotics who have embraced communism in the zeal of youth. I believe that only a fraction would not rally to a =cause=. Let us face it, we're not proposing them with a very dramatic, dynamic one anywhere today. No letter today. I'll try to diminish my solemnity.

Al.

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**June 6, 1969**

Dear Trude

I was called in early this morning as they had brought in by dust-off 25 Montaguard civilians whose village had been hit by the V.C. I rushed my first patient in -- a 1 year old boy -- who had been shot in the abdomen. Curiously, his appendix, and solely that, was, in its entirety protruding through the entrance fillet wound. After I had opened his belly I was hopeful to see that only his bowel, small and large, had been hit. There were something like ten perforations. The baby was tolerating everything well as I was repairing the last of the bowel lacerations when the kid suddenly, and we still don't know why, had cardiac arrest. We tried vigorously to resuscitate him, to no avail. I was so dejected as I felt that the kid would do very well. Somebody told me that his mother, they thought, was on Ward 5 with lesser injuries awaiting her turn in surgery. As soon as I could finish up my other cases I went to ward 5 and, through an interpreter, ascertained that the child was hers. I told her that it had died in surgery. The lady, with typical Montaguard stoicism, revealed only a superficially fleeting reaction to the notification. The interpreter told me that the ladie's husband had also been killed in the terrorism.

I was totally depressed. Then I got back to the office and opened your letter of 2 June and, ironically, felt relief when I read it -- especially the part enclosed.

*["Always problems. For the past four nights an armadillo has been digging up the yard and the ice maker isn't making ice cubes. It hasn't rained for several weeks (I'm afraid of overtaxing my water*

*pump again by watering). Mr Buchanan has left. The pool still isn't the way it should be. Nuts!!  
No point on going on with this.  
Trude"]*

Somehow the contrast between your (real, certainly) problems and my day's emotional experiences amused me and I have been able to climb out a long ways from the pit of my dark mood.

Sincerely, Trudy, I recognize the problems back home. And I'm sorry about them and I can sympathize with you. So, please, for those problems you can rectify with money, use that \$700 if need be. I should get my first bonus of \$2000 in August and we can use that to pay the money back to the government.

I'm too tired to write more.

Al.

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**June 11, 1969**

Dear Trude

Are there often birds around the house? Birds that sing? I, after visiting my post-op patients last nite, went up to my office to get the mangoes that the mother superior of the Catholic Orphanage had brought to me during the day to take home. The office is on the upper floor of one of the 2 superhooches that we have and these buildings are pretty austere both inside and out, and as I was leaving my closed in office I think I heard the chirping of a bird in the beams of the loft that forms the internal roof of the building. I looked around a little bit and didn't see a bird, although it is fairly dark up there. It certainly did sound like a bird. It (or whatever produced it) made the chirping sound more than once.

It's hardly possible that it was a bird for I've never seen one on the peninsula. There is some growth but it is scrubby like desert-fringe or beyond-tree-line growth that obviously is not inviting to birds. I've seen giant turtles, snakes (mostly dead ones brought in for identification alone or to determine what one of our occasional snake-bite victims have been bitten by -- mostly cobras, krates, vipers, etc), an occasional deer on the peninsula from a helicopter, wild boars (also from a chopper) and giant lizards, fascinating 4-5 foot long ones on the rocks of the beach like those depicted in the Galapagos. But, I've never seen a bird.

Striking that one would miss something like that so much. Almost poignantly. I think I wrote to you that I had seen, and at least equally importantly, heard their song in a little park in Hong Kong.

I would never have guessed that such a thing is so important to anticipate again. I seem a little daft and addled I suppose, but life, fortunately, is comprised of such delight in balancing out against the cheap, tawdry and horror.

I am going to be able to go to Singapore. 16-18 June. Essentially, it will mean only one full day there, for we go by the Old Goon and since it is prudent to fly the sea route, circumventing the land (to avoid becoming a wholesome target to the VC) the painfully slow C47 takes over 5 hours to make the trip each way. We get there late day of the 16th and take off drearily early on the morning of the 18th. I hope Malcolm and Pam are not on a holiday.

Al.

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**June 12, 1969**

Dear Trude

Sad tonite, somehow. Not really 'somehow'. And I am perhaps the fool of fools. Death, dying is the one inevitable truth probably. They die here differently certainly but death populates the minutes and seconds and the places of earth where there is life to culminate this act in.

Jimmy Stewart's stepson, a Marine Lt or Capt, was killed today or last nite near DaNang. He was killed fighting. Strange, but I felt a close, sensitive kinship to Jimmy Stewart and his wife, Gloria. I don't think -- I haven't met two people who've left an impression on me as they had. It had barely little to do with his being, or having been almost everybody's movie idol. [Dad makes a clinical assessment of Mr. Stewart's health here, which I'm redacting out of respect to his family] And Gloria -- this is part of the impression left with me, that it is only natural and right that she be called that, with familiarity -- has a charm and reality about her that is unique. I saw the compassion and pride with which they made the rounds of every G.I. in the hospital and the magnetic rapport they had with each. Nothing colorful or glamorous. The Stewarts were humble and grateful to the men.

Jimmy Stewart is an Air Force man, through and through. A quiet, dedicated, sensitive American. I talked with them about Gloria's son when they were here. They loved him very much. They were both concerned and proud of him.

By strange coincidence, I saw Jimmy on the Dean Martin show just an hour ago. A beautifully rendered comedy scene of the sweetest, highest calibre. Outstanding actor.

As I recognize, I am some kind of a nut. But the death of the son of such a magnificent couple has touched me deeply. Such gentle, fine people. It's almost as if it were a personal loss for me.

Al.

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**June 19, 1969**

Dear Trude

0830 (a.m. for the unindoctrinated) and back in the office after nursing report. Back from Singapore and to reality. A piece of reality -- called at 0300 because of a battle casualty brought in by Dust-off. The orthopedist. had been called as well as our ophthalmologist. When I had scrubbed and come into the room the eyeball guy and his NCO assistant had already scrubbed and gowned and were sitting along one side of the room, the ophthalmologist with his magnifying glasses on and both he and his assistant holding their arms, crooked at the elbow, to maintain their asepsis. They looked for all the world like unwilling vultures awaiting their corpse. I opened the guy's belly because of multiple fragment-wounds while the orthopods were working on the arm and legs and eventually we were able to shift ourselves so that the ophthalmologist could work himself in.

A hell of a chunk of reality. And I am so tired of it.

Al.

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**June 21, 1969**

Dear Trude

[enclosed: 6/18/69 news photo clipping of '25,000th Patient at Cam Ranh Bay' Michael Arnold, of Minneapolis, with nurse Lt. Rosemary Smith of West Virginia]

Your letters of the 11th and 13th awaiting when I returned on the 17th. None since. I suspect that letters from both directions are more difficult to get to since my end of tour is nearing its end. I don't think age or maturity or anything else lessens the near-sustaining need to get letters from home whenever one is away in a situation such as this. An umbilical cord, however tenuous or attenuated.

I do intend to take the boys places when I return. A good way to get reacquainted. You know, I've had recurrences of feelings of guilt over the year for, while not exactly promising, I implied to the boys that I would like to take them to a drive-in movie before I left home and somehow never got around to it. Strange how something like that preys on one's mind and conscience in a situation like mine during the year. One does a lot of thinking here. Of many things. I suspect it has to do with isolation from family and familiarity in general, escape from the anguish and ugliness of mangled bodies, and a curious blend of loneliness and boredom.

I have appreciated your loyalty in writing so often. Your cut-off date should be 27 June since I am leaving early in the morning (0100) on 2 June [he probably meant July]. I plan to arrive in Tampa on the 5th or 6th, probably evening.

What armadillo?

Sorry about the house air conditioner. I assume it is repaired by now.

Al.

P.S. Sorry you were out of envelopes too.

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**June 30, 1969**

Dear Trude

No letter today, nor for the last 3 or 4 days. I appreciate that it is difficult to get stimulated to write at this late date.

As far as I know I'll be taking off at 0500 day after tomorrow. So this should be my last letter to you from sunny Vietnam. I'm essentially totally adjusted to the idea, now. As I've said before tho' a little part of me resents giving the place up to others. A most memorable year.

Al.

---

**June 30, 1969** [follow-up letter]

Dear Trude

In addition to the 'single-digit' fidgets today, I arrive at the 'no-mores' stage, i.e.: 'no-more Wednesdays', etc. Crazy Americans. Good to be one. I read somewhere recently of the contrast between the Russians and they Yanks being so well illustrated in the space flight program.

-- The Russians either have already or will, deliver to the moon or Venus or Mars a plaque bearing the musty tidings of Lenin while we, in typical lightheartedness, venture out around the moon in crafts -officially- named Charlie Brown and Snoopy.

I relinquished command to Col. Max Nareff yesterday. Damn. It's crazy, I know, but I sincerely regretted to do it. I suspect that I have the intangible attribute of being a good and natural leader. I am aware of the sanctimony and immodesty in that statement but immediately following the departure of Col. K. I learned many things that really surprised me. first, shockingly, apparently I am the only one who was, and am, fond of Phil K. Second, after he left, I was told repeatedly by members of all the groups that the morale, productivity of the total personnel had hung entirely on my presence. that I was the buffer element (and not consciously knowing it) that kept the place going. Morale did escalate when I did take over and this fact had already been noted by the Wing people, etc on base and even in the -States-. Nareff told me this. He came from Travis. And, I think, again immodestly, that the changes were not entirely reactionary but because people like to work for me.

Please excuse the self-adulation. I feel so ambivalent about leaving. It has been a memorable year and I have made good friends that I hate to leave. And the hospital has become sort of an almost integral part of me.

My letters are becoming infrequent. There is so much to do before Wednesday. Especially in training Nareff.

Al.

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